

Understanding Between Parents and Children¹

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Part II – Swamiji With Teenagers *Understanding Your Roots*

Two Cultures

I have talked to your parents about their concerns, worries, and anxieties. It is not only here in this country that parents are worried and concerned. All over the world parents are the same. But, perhaps, here in this country their concern is much more. You should know from where your parents have come. They are first-generation Indians who have a certain value structure. It may be easier for you to handle your children when that time comes, but it is a problem for your parents. For you, also, it is a problem—you have a difficult time adjusting to two cultures. At home there is one culture; then outside the home, when you go to school, there is a society and another culture. Your parents, being first generation, there is a definite visible difference in the two cultures.

Indians are very good in adapting, and your parents have adapted a good deal. Having come here, they have changed a lot. They have come a long way in absorbing certain values and attitudes that are not injurious to their own values and attitudes. They now go to a drive-in and pick up a veggie burger. In India, nobody ever heard of a burger, but here they go for a veggie burger. That is a big thing! The drive-in, veggie burgers, French fries, and ketchup are all American. Your parents are not used to all this, but they have adapted and have learned a few things like this.

Living A Life of Discipline and Study

There are a few things that your parents have difficulty in assimilating. One of them is compromising with the *ashrama* system. Your parents have a very clear-cut understanding of the stages (*ashrama*) in life. In the first stage, the person is a student (*brahmachari*), which means he lives a life of discipline. You are not even supposed to lie down on a cot. You should lie down on the floor on a mat. Just understand this. That is enough. We don't expect you to do that, and you won't do it also. That is not the point. But that is a life of discipline. There again your parents have compromised a lot. A student must live a studious life. You are a student first and foremost until you finish college.

Here in American high schools, students become more than students—there is study and then there is “going steady.” It seems that the two things go together. You must have heard about “going steady.” Indian parents do not understand this. They only understand study. So this is a problem. They know only study, study, study, and then play. They accept play very well. Study and play! Therefore, play when you play, and study when you study! These two things the parents accept. Then you may learn other things also and study. If you want to learn the guitar or the piano, they will allow you to do that. They didn't even know what a guitar and a piano were before coming to America. Only after coming here did they see a guitar and a piano.

¹ Swami Dayananda's talks to parents and their children at Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, Saylorsburg, PA, 2004, transcribed by John Lehosky and edited by Sharon Cliff.

Originally, back home, they didn't hear all these musical instruments. They heard the violin and the bamboo flute—the short and the long one—and the big pipe. These are the few things that they were exposed to in India. That is Indian music! Having come here, they have adapted, and they have allowed their children to learn the piano if they wanted to. It is good to learn music.

Understanding Your Roots

It is important to understand from where your parents have come. Have you read the book *Roots* or heard about *Roots*? Two centuries ago, many African people were uprooted from their culture in Africa and brought here to this country as slaves, and they had to assimilate this culture. I went to Kenya and saw

some of those black cultures. Those people are happy there being what they are. How much can they adapt? They *have* adapted, but still they are not at home. Still they are estranged from their own culture.

It is important, psychologically, for a person to be emotionally stable, and it is also important, psychologically, that one absorbs his or her own parental culture. A person's culture is his or her parental culture, not where he or she grew up. One's parental culture is one's roots. One should know what that culture is all about. There is an infrastructure to absorb. Every culture has got its own something. It is not that one culture is superior or inferior to another. That is not the point. I always used to wonder what it was that the black people were complaining about. They have lost their culture, their roots, but what is it they have lost? I used to think that they were better off here. Then, afterwards, I found out that that was not the case.

Anyway, your parents, when they were in their own places, in their own set-up, were okay; they grew up secure. But when they were uprooted and came here to this country, they became insecure. That is the situation. That is why it is difficult for them. You have to understand that your parents have come a long way. But they cannot understand what this "going steady" is. They can only understand what study is. Please try to understand them. Don't blame them. It is not that they are unreasonable. They *are* reasonable.

About eighty percent or more of your parents were married by arrangement. Some of them hadn't even met each other before their wedding day. All dating was done by their horoscopes. Some people didn't even have their horoscopes matched. They simply took a leap into the darkness. A person never understands another person and then gets married to that person. It never happens. After twenty-five years of marriage, you will still find that you are surprised. You *cannot* understand another person. Nobody can understand another person. One gets married because he or she has decided to get married. That is it!

A lot of factors are taken into account before two people are married, such as the person's background, matching horoscopes, family background, and whether there is any cultural conflict. They have to adjust all the time. It is a life of compromise. Nothing is taken for granted. For everybody, in every culture, it is the same thing.

Before the marriage, the parents will see whether there is cultural parity, economic parity, and educational parity. Economic and cultural parity may be there, but suppose the girl is highly educated and the boy is not educated. It won't work. The parents must also take into account

the educational parity. Then they make sure that the horoscopes match. After that the marriage is performed. There is trust in *Īśvara*. The marriage is performed with a lot of prayers; then, afterwards, whatever comes, they accept. It has worked all these years, and the percentage of marriages where it doesn't work is negligible. However, nowadays, it doesn't work that way.

One situation is where you discover the person before you get married. You marry the person you *think you love*. You think that the person is like this; then, after you get married, you discover the person is not like this. Then the honeymoon is over. Every month you will be discovering new things. Afterwards, you just put up with the person. It is the mutual understanding that is called love. Love is understanding and accepting the person as the person is. It is very important to understand and accept each other; then the marriage will work. The other situation is where you discover the person after you get married. You accept the person before you know the person. After all, love is understanding. You understand the person.

That is a great culture! One has to admire it. That kind of trust was something special. It is not an ordinary thing. Where is that trust? Where has it gone? Our grandparents had something special. One commits his or her entire life to a person because, originally, there was no second marriage available. In Hindu religion, there was no legal separation. If a married couple couldn't get along, they would have physical space. That was all. The woman went back to her parent's house. The marriage was never broken because there wasn't any legal device to break it. Recently, not even fifty years ago, a law was introduced in India allowing for divorces. So that is the background from which your parents have come.

Both parents and children have to understand each other. The parents have to understand their children who are growing up here in this country, and the children have to understand where their parents have come from. Then somewhere halfway in between they need to meet. It is very important. The parents are ready to compromise, they are ready to reconcile because they now have a better understanding of their children. I have talked to them.

A certain age, at least, is necessary before this going out or "going steady" takes place, and the parents can set that limit. And, as a student, your studies are never over. There must be a responsible way of dealing with this. This is all for your own life, for your own good. It is not that somebody is standing in somebody's way. Please understand: there is no standing in between; there is only understanding. That is what we require—understanding. Your parents have to understand you, and you have to understand your parents.

When You Study, You Study

You must be very careful about how you live your life. It is important. When you study, you study. When I was going to high school in India, there was a big freedom movement; and some of the political leaders used to come to the school and talk. We were all inspired. When I was in the ninth grade, I wanted to join this political movement that shouted against the British colonial government, "Down! Down!" The freedom movement used to have demonstrations and all kinds of things, and the British police would send the demonstrators to jail. Going to jail and coming out was a big thing at that time. It was kind of like a badge—"I went to jail and came out for freedom fighting against the British." It was peaceful fighting, not violent fighting, because of Gandhiji's leadership. The British were violent, not the freedom fighters. The leadership is so important.

It was a beautiful movement. Thanks to Gandhiji's leadership, we gained freedom through non-violence. The police used to beat up the demonstrators and throw them into jail. Gandhiji would say that was okay—"Get beaten up. It will hurt them because we haven't done anything wrong." I wanted to join this struggle. Then one of my teachers, who was a very responsible person, called me into his office and told me, "Hey, don't join all these demonstrations. You are a student, not a politician. You need to study, learn, and understand what is going on in our country. Finish your education; then, afterwards, do whatever you like. Until then, don't join. You can study and understand politics, but don't join this political movement."

His advice went into my head, and even to this day I am thankful to him for that advice. He advised me properly. He was called "Oh Ho" Ramaswamy Iyer because for anything you would say, he would say, "Oh! Ho!" He had a master's degree in physics and also he had gone through teacher's training. He earned only fifty rupees at that time. He was such a brilliant man! He would have become a Nobel Laureate if he had had all the opportunities. I can never forget him; he gave me good advice. He said, "When you study, you study." Now I am repeating the same thing—When you study, you study.

After a certain age, you are able to decide and make your own judgments. Keep your parents with you. Don't do anything that will hurt them. I have talked to your parents also—how to trust and enjoy you children. I told them to trust you. They are legitimately worried about what will happen to you. The world is not the same. It is not just you alone that make up the world. There are different people in the world. Your parents are mortally afraid. They are not ready to become grandparents right away. They want a few more years to simply be parents. That is all. They are very worried people. So I told them, "Don't worry! Trust your children—their judgment, their capacities. Enjoy them! Children are a gift from *Bhagavan*."

Are there any questions?

Q. "From what you said, our parents have definitely come far. They have adapted to their new environment, and they have accepted things that are new and different to them; but, at the same time, they go overboard with the unusual; they see two negative things where, really, there is nothing. How should I handle that?"

Swamiji. This is the area that I have talked to your parents about. They see negative things, perhaps, because of their over anxiety. I told them to drop their anxiety. They are capable of trust. They married in trust. The trust hasn't gone. The trust *is* there. But when they see the society and hear what is happening in this country, they are frightened. That is all. They are capable of trust and have a tremendous capacity to trust. But when they see and hear what parents are advised to tell their small children—"When a stranger approaches you or calls you, you must scream and run"—that frightens them. That is what children are told—"If any stranger comes up to you and offers you candy or anything at all, scream and run away."

Except parents, everybody else in this country is a stranger. That means you cannot trust anybody. When your parents hear this, it frightens them. That is why I talked to them. I told them to relax—"You need not worry about it." You can also point out—"Come on, Swamiji told you to relax. Just enjoy us!" Tell them: "Trust us! We won't do anything that you will be ashamed of." Tell them that and mean it. In fact, they will be very well assured.